



CHAPTER 10

Local Cultures, Language Politics, and Service Learning in the TEFL Certificate Course (*Ecuador*)

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Issue

Advertisements for teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) certificate courses typically assure potential candidates that graduates will be prepared to teach English around the world and in any cultural context. Yet is this the case? Can a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching English adequately address English language learners' cultures? Having team-taught a TEFL certificate course in Ecuador for a number of years, I had become increasingly troubled by the TEFL candidates' apparent apathy about the role of teaching English in the cultures they were entering and their basic knowledge of local current events, economic conditions, and history. Consequently, the lessons they presented, modeled on commercial course books, showed little relevance to the Ecuadorian students' lives and realities.

A further concern was that the TEFL candidates' practice teaching included little experience with English language learners (ELLs) from a range of economic classes. Absent, in particular, were ELLs who did not enroll in English classes at our teaching site because of inadequate resources, such as help with their children and time away from work. Living with middle- and upper-class host families and teaching ELLs from these same families, TEFL candidates had modest, if any, interactions with indigenous or working-class ELLs. Although the TEFL certificate course promises preparation for global teaching, I became

increasingly concerned that the TEFL course was not preparing candidates for teaching English to students even within the cultures and class stratifications of our small community in Ecuador.

The TEFL candidates expressed the belief that English is the necessary ticket to upward mobility, and they showed little interest in debating this conviction or its source. In initial journal entries and reflection sessions, TEFL candidates demonstrated a common notion of what Phillipson (1988) termed *linguicism*, “the ideologies and structures which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and nonmaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of their language (i.e., of their mother tongue)” (p. 339). Indeed, candidates demonstrated resistance to discussing any political aspects of English teaching in developing countries. One student wrote the following:

As a new TEFL teacher, I know I am more than an English teacher. I am a vehicle for helping people achieve their goals and dreams, whether they be as lofty as using English to work as a doctor or as simple as wanting to take a vacation in Disneyland. I don't agree with, or really understand for that matter, all the political implications of EFL . . . call me unpolitical or a bad citizen, but I don't see the connection.

At the same time, TEFL candidates often voiced surprise and resentment upon discovering that they could not teach in Europe without a European Union passport.

Disturbed by the TEFL candidates' apparently limited interest in examining their future work critically, my teaching colleague and I set out to revise the course to include service learning and reflective activities. We made these course revisions to promote deeper understandings in TEFL candidates of the experiences of Ecuadorian ELLs beyond our classrooms at the language school and, in turn, more awareness of sociocultural aspects of TEFL. Within this context, course revisions were analyzed to (a) identify TEFL candidates' perceptions of the relationships between language learning and culture and (b) determine if TEFL candidates' teaching practices were influenced by their reflections on cultural dimensions of language teaching.

The role of English in Ecuadorian culture in particular highlights the politicized nature of learning English. In the late 1990s, Ecuador experienced an economic crisis that continues to negatively affect, to a great degree, family and community stability, employment, and living standards (Pribilsky, 2001). Although Ecuadorian immigration was extensive prior to 2000, the current migration of Ecuadorian citizens to the United States and Spain for temporary employment is immense. The third largest city of Ecuadorians is not in Ecuador; it is New York (Whitten, 2003). Family life, particularly among rural families, has been decimated; in many villages, one encounters only women, young chil-

dren, and the elderly. Clearly, Ecuadorians are highly motivated to learn English in order to migrate and become *residentes* in the United States. Ecuadorian teachers I interviewed believed that many secondary students, especially public school students, were motivated to attend school only because they could learn English. English language learning then often becomes the vehicle for procuring a temporary job in the United States that will, after 2 or 3 years of working, allow nationals to pay off the \$12,000 to \$15,000 debt owed to the *coyote* (or smuggler) who assisted them with entry into the United States. English has become the principal, and most desired, educational commodity supporting migration and transnationalism, and English has become the skill that fragments families, communities, and the nation.

Background Literature

Maley (1992) noted, “English language teaching (ELT) has been bedeviled with three perennial problems: the gulf between classroom activities and real life; the separation of ELT from the main stream of educational ideas; the lack of a content as its subject matter” (p. 73). Typical TEFL curricula include little discussion of political and cultural contexts for learning English. H. D. Brown (1994) spoke of the teacher’s need to understand local culture, cautioning that “at every turn in our curricula, we must beware of imposing a foreign value system on our learners for the sake of bringing a common language to all” (p. 195). Discussions of the native speaker fallacy as well as an English-only policy in the classroom also address the politicized issues of linguistic advantage—asking whose language and whose culture are privileged in the TEFL profession. Ferguson and Donno (2003) describe the ideological implications of the native speaker as an “anachronistic privileging,” born of the “assumption that because native speakers already possess intuitive proficiency in English, they can be certified to teach with a limited amount of explicit language awareness and pedagogical training a one-month course can provide” (p. 29). In her analysis of the English-only policies of ELT, Auerbach (1993) stated, “The rationale used to justify English-only in the classroom is neither conclusive nor pedagogically sound” (p. 9), further underscoring the problematic and politicized history of ELT.

Pennycook (1999) argued that English language teachers need to reflect critically on their work:

Given the local and global contexts within which English is bound up, all of us involved in TESOL might do well to consider our work not merely according to the reductive meanings attached to labels such as *teaching* and *English*, but rather as located at the very heart of some of the most crucial educational, cultural, and political issues of our time. (p. 346)

Describing his experience of these concerns on a personal level, Ramanathan (2005) outlined the historical practices of teaching a dominant language within the cultural contexts of student learning and considerations for transforming TEFL curricula and practices:

I have myself begun to probe and cross-examine most aspects of West-based teacher education to include several issues that West-based TESOL typically does not address, including: (a) fronting issues of L1 education by encouraging student teachers to investigate local dynamics between L1 retention and L2 learning practices, policies, and tools; (b) incorporating situated readings regarding English . . . and local languages; (c) drawing on reading and research on heritage language learning and bi/multiculturalism. Although TESOL has generally considered these domains as falling outside of its purview—West-based TESOL has remained remarkably insular—the field can no longer ignore them. (p. 122)

TEFL certificate courses often reveal the problematic elements discussed by Ramanathan (2005), yet they continue to be represented as comprehensive preparation for global teaching. Although traditional TEFL certification requires certain elements of pedagogical and content knowledge, many aspects of teaching and learning common in broader educational discourses—including critical practice and culturally relevant teaching—are absent or truncated. It is also arguable that TEFL certificate courses are driven by tradition rather than research-derived data. Ferguson and Donno (2003), in their critique of TEFL training programs, pointed to this gap: “Considering . . . the relatively large scale of this training activity, the dearth of published research into the phenomena is curious” (p. 26). Because I found little research directly related to my project and concerns, the candidates, the class, and our own reflections became the ground for my fieldwork.

Procedures

The study took place during the 5-week TEFL course in Ecuador, and the participants were 12 TEFL candidates. Although one of the candidates had grown up in the Andes, all candidates were U.S. citizens. Most were or had been traditional students, typically juniors or seniors in college or recent graduates. One student had taught English in Japan for 2 years through a Japanese language teaching program; another student had a few years of experience as a paraprofessional in a Latino preschool in the United States. Course experiences included daily 4-hour class sessions with two professors in the mornings and 2 hours of practice teaching to local residents each evening.

The qualitative measures used in this study of teaching candidates’ learning

experiences in the TEFL course reflect an ethnographic approach to research methodology. In the role of participant-observer (Spradley, 1980), I employed multiple and triangulated qualitative measures to gather and analyze data about the candidates' understandings of the sociocultural elements of TEFL, their motivations for becoming EFL teachers, as well as their knowledge of subsequent language (L2) acquisition. I collected data from the following sources:

- Pre- and postcourse surveys of TEFL candidates' beliefs about first and subsequent language acquisition, effective teaching and learning, and motivations for becoming EFL teachers.
- Reflective teaching journals.
- Critical incident reports.
- Videotaped classroom discussion sessions.
- Teaching metaphors.
- Reflective writing in portfolios.

Early in the course, candidates filled out questionnaires designed to assess their beliefs about language teaching and learning, their educational backgrounds, degrees earned, and their prior teaching experience. The other data sources provided records of TEFL candidates' reflections, and I analyzed them by employing teacher research approaches to identify relevant data (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992). Most of these artifacts were authentic class assignments in the TEFL course, and these were examined for recurring themes and metaphors (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Videotaping of class discussions and debriefing sessions allowed for a more systematic analysis of any revisions in the candidates' questioning and responses. My goal was to mine these artifacts for a better understanding of the candidates' beliefs about their evolving identities as language teachers. I particularly focused on their interpretations of their roles and practices in the classroom in relation to their understanding of teaching in a culture that was not their own.

The reflective writing and discussions of the TEFL candidates in portfolio reflections, in other written artifacts, and in classroom and in postteaching feedback sessions provided a vehicle for them to process their experiences collaboratively. Each candidate was asked, for example, to write for 5 to 10 minutes after each class session he or she taught, before receiving oral and written feedback from the instructor and peers. This practice provided a window into each candidate's complexity of and growth in thinking about lesson planning and implementation. Candidates were also asked, in their portfolio narratives and teaching metaphors, to chart their own development as teachers of English with prompts that asked them to examine their content knowledge as well as their

understandings of students, teaching, and learning. I also analyzed the course artifacts produced by candidates for manifestations of conceptual and attitudinal change—for example, candidates' emerging understandings of the local cultures of their students—and then for incorporation of more relevant materials in their classes, using Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model.

In the attitude survey, candidates were asked whether they believed there were any political dimensions to TEFL. Some left the question blank, some begged off as not knowledgeable enough to answer, and some described the necessity of learning English:

Elena: It's quite possible. However, I haven't given it much thought.

Jennifer: Sadly, I am very ignorant about politics. I'm sure there are good answers here, but I don't have them.

Dave: USA owns the world. People have to learn English if they want to survive.

A second question asked, "How do you expect to benefit personally from gaining a TEFL certificate?" Answers included the following:

Simon: I expect to gain employment because this will make me marketable.

Jennifer: Personally, I think it will help me further my education by helping me get into graduate school.

Alison: I hope it will give me more chances of getting a job teaching in the U.S.

Elena: I can travel the world for the rest of my life and know there will always be a way for me to get by.

The answers to both questions reveal the candidates' beliefs that learning English and teaching English are instruments to achieving economic and personal goals. The TEFL candidates align their purposes for teaching English and their students' purposes for learning English as mirroring each other. In this teaching setting, the teachers perceived little cultural dissonance between the groups and their goals.

An important addition to the TEFL course under discussion included the incorporation of a weekend service project—an effort to broaden candidates' understandings of and experiences with teaching diverse groups, pushing them beyond their comfort zone. The project occurred 2 hours outside our usual site in a small, Ecuadorian village that had suffered greatly in the national economic crisis and subsequent emigration. In preparation for the rural experience, candidates read an anthropological study of the effects of the crisis on rural Ecuadorian families and, in particular, children. The study focused on the province in which our course took place as well as the area from which the majority of Ecuadorian *residentes* in the U.S. emigrate. In the study, Pribilsky

(2001) argued that a condition known as *nervios*—extreme depression in youth—has emerged as a consequence of the transformation of family life from one previously focused on farming and family relationships to one driven by the desire for material goods, influenced by U.S. consumption patterns. In recent years, with the interventions of the World Bank and an increase in transnationalism, Ecuadorians have adopted consumer desires reflecting those in the United States—Gap and Hilfiger clothing, DVD players, and sport utility vehicles. Large homes proliferate in the mountains, built by remittances from fathers and other family members who are working in New York, Miami, and other U.S. cities.

TEFL candidates spent most of their time in the rural village interacting with the local residents by doing interviews, conducting cultural mapping, sharing meals, and teaching English to a group of residents studying to be tour guides. Residents of this village talked not only of the importance of caring for the natural resources of their village and surrounding area, but of the importance of finding alternative methods to create a sustainable community. I analyzed the candidates' written responses to and discussions of their new knowledge about a rural Ecuadorian culture for attitudinal changes in their beliefs about the role of English in such a community. Also, candidates' beliefs about teaching methods and subsequent teaching practices in light of their reflections about the service project were analyzed for evidence of change.

Results

At the beginning of the course, candidates' responses to writing prompts and in-class remarks showed little connection with sociopolitical and cultural aspects of language teaching. As course modifications were implemented to address these issues, however, there was a marked transformation in the candidates' depth of thinking, as seen in their movement from a dualistic certainty about the role of English to a deeper questioning of the implications of English for Ecuadorians as learners within a complex cultural landscape.

The effect of the service experience on candidates' insights into the political and personal meanings of learning English in Ecuador was to contextualize and ground classroom reading with the lived reality of a cultural group different from their own—rural, poor, and suffering from community and family dislocation and fragmentation. In reflection sessions and journal entries, candidates began to express a more elaborated understanding of learning and teaching English and schooling in Ecuador than was previously gained in their practice teaching in the urban language school. A feature of rural Ecuadorian education that particularly stood out to the TEFL candidates concerned the limited quality and quantity of schooling opportunities available to children. At the *primaria*, students have 5-hour school days, but 3 of those hours, typically, are recess

time. Because no teachers live in the village, teachers have to travel 2 hours by bus—each way—each day to the school as well as pay for their own bus fare on an extremely limited salary. If a teacher does not come to school, there is no substitute.

Through the experience of the service learning project, TEFL candidates began to critique their own beliefs about the economic and political factors driving English learning for Ecuadorians and the implications for cultural erosion. They also began to think about how these insights fit with their previous experiences and assumptions, recognizing the causes and consequences of emigration. Although the candidates' responses could be seen as romanticizing poverty, the candidates were also at the border—finding themselves in intellectual disequilibrium and beginning to analyze their work as TEFL teachers critically. The following are representative of comments made by many candidates in journal entries and reflection sessions:

Elena: Black and white. Night and day [rural versus urban]. But they [rural residents] don't understand here that if they come to work in the U.S. they will probably have to take crappy jobs. They have this big misconception that all Americans are rich and that if they learn English and move, they too will have a better life.

Claire: They live in one of the most amazing places in the world and they have an amazing culture. I am jealous of what they have and they just want to be like "rich Americans." American culture is not nearly as rich—it's based on material goods and things that to me aren't important at all. So I guess the thing that stuck in my mind the most is how badly these people are striving to be able to be like Americans when, to me, Americans are doing it all wrong.

Jennifer: Personally, I think they [the residents] are doing something right. They have what they need and they get to spend time with their families.

Linda: The children and their families are confronting many of the issues facing their counterparts in the U.S., specifically, the breakdown of family connection through outside influences. In the U.S., parents work more and more with the intent to provide a better life for their children. The result is that children spend little time with their parents . . . the entertainment industry and consumerism are used to fill the emptiness. Depression is rampant—antidepressants are prescribed increasingly for children and young adults. Ecuador's situation, unfortunately, has followed the U.S.'s lead.

Candidates began, during and after the service project, to reflect on their teaching practices within the framework of their new learning. Here, evidence for the third stage in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model emerged. Kolb formulated the following processes: (a) concrete experience and observation, (b) considered reflection, (c) synthesis and abstract conceptualization, and (d) testing of concepts in new situations. A shift in TEFL candidates' thinking toward more

questioning as well as acknowledging a need to understand their students as a critical element of teaching practice became evident:

Meghan: As a TEFL teacher, I need to take into consideration a lot of things. I need to think about the individuals I am teaching and why the students I am teaching want to learn English. Is it so they can migrate to the U.S.? Are they going to ruin their families? Am I okay with that possibility?

Simon: Maybe by teaching English I am causing a rift between them and their friends who are not learning English.

Elena: Symbols of achievement among families come from remittance funds to buy new technology-based gifts, stoves, expensive clothing. These things literally take the place of the fathers. As a TEFL teacher, I have learned how culturally sensitive topics can be.

Dave: English can be a barrier more than it is a gateway for people. This raises some cognitive dissonance in my mind because by being a TEFL teacher, I would be helping to reduce that barrier that exists but I would also be supporting the idea that others need to learn our language in order to thrive.

Linda: As an EFL teacher, I need to be very careful when teaching with the approaches we will use, culturally speaking. We will have to valorize and validate everybody's background and culture.

TEFL candidates also gained insights into a variety of information about literacy practices in school, local cultural knowledge, and avenues of learning (e.g., multiple intelligences) through the service project:

Claire: When I was teaching English in the village, I was totally startled by the incapacity of one student to answer a simple question. . . . The first thing I thought was that I didn't do a good job teaching, but after, discussing my experience with my classmates and colleagues, I realized that this student was doing what he learned to do in school every day—repeat everything the teacher says.

Linda: I realized while I was teaching in the village that traditional classroom learning, whether it be through photos, writing and/or speaking is not necessarily the best form for some people. I showed her [my student] numerous colors and went over words in the classroom, however it was not until I showed her in *nature* that she understood. In the classroom, she couldn't identify a tree, but the moment we stepped outdoors, I noticed it was the first thing she knew when I pointed to it. . . . For the first time, I really saw a difference in the learning techniques away from the way I learn. I know of the theories . . . but through my work with this woman, I finally put a face to the theory. It may be said that this could have happened in the States for me as well, but the fact that it took place in an environment in which I was forced to use alternative methods for teaching makes all the more impact.

The responses are evidence of the candidates' developing sense of dialogic understanding or, as Freire (1970) explained, moving toward a theory of informed teaching practice as cultural action. In the remainder of the course, TEFL candidates continued to critically analyze their practice in light of their new understandings of a culture quite different from their own, now critiquing teaching materials, methodologies, and their own assumptions:

Elena: Blech. That's how I feel about tonight's lesson. Following [a publisher's] lesson plan, I taught "The Twelve Days of Christmas" . . . but teaching students with local realia and developing lexis based on things that are important to them and not me will be helpful in instructing and not simultaneously promoting American ways of life.

One candidate had written early in the course that his only experience with a foreign language was derived from working in a meat-packing plant. In the entry below, the depth of his self-reflection on learning from his time in Ecuador in the TEFL course is evident:

Dave: I was standing out on the deck smoking cigarettes and thinking about things when I thought, "You dumbass. All's you've been doing for the last four years is drinking and screwing around with girls. . . . I think experiencing another culture gave me time to reflect on my life back home. Seeing the way other people live and allowing myself to respect and appreciate that let me realize that there are many ways to live and be happy, especially in places like this village where everyone seemed so happy without having most of the things I think are so great. I don't believe in huge moments of epiphany that change the way I live . . . but I would have never thought anything different if I had not come to South America.

Kolb (1984) described the fourth stage in the cycle of reflection in service learning as being able to apply new understandings to coursework and even one's life. TEFL candidates, by the end of their experience in the course, have accrued information about and practice in teaching English, and also have developed further their abilities to critically analyze not only teaching but their interactions with others and roles within the world.

In examining the TEFL candidates' development as culturally aware, reflective teachers through their journals, videotaped dialogues, and teaching metaphors, I found evidence of engaged reflection through questioning and dialogue about the relationship between the ELLs' cultures and the learning of English. Many candidates began the class with some understandings of these concerns. However, teaching practice in a range of communities, including the rural service project, became the key element in expanding candidates' understanding of teaching, as seen in their reflections. The experience allowed TEFL candidates to reconceptualize their role in the classroom as colearners rather than bank-

ers—or transmitters of knowledge—in Freirian (1970) terms. The analysis of the TEFL course reviewed here suggests that integrating models of experiential or service learning is central in engendering culturally aware and responsive TEFL teachers.

An additional factor to be considered in measuring the project's success is the methodology employed to prepare candidates for the service experience. Using a constructivist experiential teaching methodology, I offered information for candidates to consider in their instructional planning, but I did not provide recipes. Within a constructivist model, learners are seen as self-directed, active participants in their own learning. In this case, the TEFL candidates were given learning resources and then asked to respond to and design their language teaching by first listening to the ELLs.

Curriculum and materials were derived from, rather than imposed upon, the ELLs. In fact, because the English classes in the rural village typically included entire families with children as young as 5, and the class had decided to teach to the families rather than divide students by age and level of English skills, textbooks were not as relevant or appropriate as other, more authentic teaching approaches and activities. TEFL candidates had also read about the local culture and spent time learning about it from the residents themselves in the authentic context of a tour (students were studying to be ecotourism guides). TEFL candidates were encouraged to assume a different role as teachers, specifically by having the tour groups act as teachers for the TEFL candidates during English class time, placing the ELLs in the role of knowledge holders and creators.

By revising teacher and learner roles and rejecting the dominance of publisher-driven instructional materials, TEFL candidates were able to reconceptualize themselves and their learners. Rather than embracing the traditional method of structure-driven direct instruction, they began to see themselves as teachers within a framework of reflective practice and constructivism. In this experience, TEFL candidates' teaching paradigms clearly departed from a model of language learning to Krashen's (2003) model of language acquisition.

Reflection

I have presented the initial insights from an ongoing exploratory study of a TEFL certificate course with a particular focus on enhancing the course through service learning. The experience was designed to increase TEFL candidates' cultural awareness, reflective teaching practice, and professional mindset. As a TEFL course instructor, I find it critical to my own classroom practice to engender in my students a grounded understanding of (a) the complex cultures in which my graduates will teach; (b) formal and informal schooling structures, local literacy practices, and pathways of learning that support or impede

language learning in particular communities; and (c) current theory and research from the wider community of L2 professionals. Further investigation of these elements of L2 language teaching would offer valuable insights into the curriculum in EFL teacher preparation.

Based on this research, the TEFL course under discussion continues to be revised in a number of ways, including increased service learning and a focus on students designing culturally relevant thematic units and lessons with a social justice orientation. Candidates are encouraged to analyze their themes critically and to examine, for example, the cultural impact of a lesson based on shopping in the United States or advertisements for Coca-Cola versus a project-based unit on local recycling practices. More local culture is incorporated into classroom materials, including arts, folk literature, and alternative medicine, valorizing the ELLs' cultural assets. Candidates also are introduced to and use more constructivist teaching approaches, for example, learning centers, literacy circles, and other cooperative learning activities (Kagan, 1986). These classroom practices are better aligned with a curriculum demonstrating support for and encouragement of understanding the ELLs in our classrooms and the cultures they represent. Additionally, candidates are required to become familiar with their Ecuadorian students and the cultural and political realities of their lives through interviews, case studies, and cultural mapping as well as extensive reading of work by educational anthropologists about current life in Ecuador. If they did any less in terms of learning about their students, TEFL candidates would gain only a naïve and shallow understanding of their host culture, leading to a complacently simple, if not arrogant, pedagogy. After candidates have gained cultural awareness and practiced reflective teaching, I hope that those moving on to teach in other cultures will bring the same critical habits of mind to their next teaching situations.

With these course changes, I believe it is possible to achieve a primary and necessary course goal—to encourage language teaching candidates to be intellectually, culturally, and professionally knowledgeable about the complexity of language teaching rather than comfortable with unexamined and culturally naïve teaching routines. Foregrounding cultural dimensions in the certificate course places EFL teaching candidates in what Giroux (1994) calls border territory:

The concept of border suggests something very subversive and unsettling. It means moving into circles of uncertainty. It means crossing into different cultural spheres, it means recognizing the multiple nature of our own identities. . . . Educators have to be more than intellectual tourists. We must move into other spheres where we take up the specificity of different contexts, geographies, different languages, of otherness, and to recognize the otherness in ourselves. (p. 167)

If, through expanding and diversifying the TEFL course field sites, it was possible to enhance and enrich the candidates' concepts of language, culture, and teaching, then it seems clear that, as a TEFL course instructor, I will improve my own teaching and course outcomes by exploring and sharing my own experiences as a teacher within specific cultural contexts as well. By incorporating classroom research approaches and investigating my students' assumptions about language learners, I will more likely succeed in helping TEFL candidates examine their otherness, their cultural beliefs, and their roles and practices as teachers of English. Finally, I will come closer to a deeper understanding of and more informed approach to designing TEFL certificate course curriculum and instruction that will better prepare candidates as socially aware and responsible members of the TESOL profession.

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